A common theme in dystopic literature often involves a situation that gets out of control. Whether it is population, scientific experiments, or government control, it all involves a situation that went too far. Zamyatin’s We presents a story about government control, however this control is about providing happiness to the people. There is heavy use of the Panopticon, and even the idea of the Panopticon, to enforce control. Instead of a clear picture, it is up to the reader to decide if they feel the One State is an evil state. We does not try to teach the total control is bad, or that total freedom is good. Instead, the character of D-503 represents the internal struggle of joining freedom and control in our lives and in our societies.

The One State is introduced to the reader through a newspaper article. This article tells them of the glory of One State, and the glory of its Benefactor. In fact, the people of One State even believe its existence is logical and that it has “mathematically infallible happiness” (Zamyatin, p. 3). One State even asserts that should the unknown creatures on alien planets not understand this happiness, “it will be our duty to force them to be happy” (Zamyatin, p. 3). The implied audience-these unknown creatures-is supposed to feel that the One State is a perfect utopia, but the text immediately guides the reader, almost forces them, to understand that the One State is not a utopia. They are instead convinced it is a state of totalitarianism, a state with one single person controlling everything without opposition.

The reader quickly assumes that if One State represents totalitarianism, then the MEPHI represents freedom. The issue with this assessment, is the reader only feels this way because they are “implicated in making a satiric judgement on folly without that judgment ever being made manifest in the text” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 241). The reader uses their judgement and own experiences to fill in the areas that are left out. Csicsery-Ronay goes on to explain that “The reader is the seduced into co-operating with the story, just as D-503 is seduced into co-operating with the MEPHI” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 241). Although the only point of view provided is that of D-503, One State functions efficiently and there are no signs of unhappiness until the day of the vote. Even then, whether the MEPHI are freedom fighters or terrorists is highly subjective. It is up to the reader to insert their views of government control versus freedom to decide whether the One-State is good or evil.

The narrator, D-503 provides no help in determining this. He begins by telling us of the absurdity of the world before One State, during the war. At the first sign of something being strange, he immediately casts doubt when he refuses to go to the Bureau of Guardians to report I-330. Someone who has complete faith in the One State should have easily accomplished this action. He even agrees to pretend he is visiting with I-330, when it clearly bothers him that she is not with him. In the end, though, he chooses to let go of the idea of freedom, allows the operation to remove his soul to happen, and lets the MEPHI fail.

The setting for the One State has a strong representation to the idea behind the Panopticon, a prison in which all of the cells are visible at any time. Only occasionally and through cleverly devised secret passageways are the MEPHI and D-503 temporarily able to avoid detection. Punishment in the One State works much like that of the Jeremy Bentham’s idea of punishment; “Bentham’s main concern here is in achieving the greatest apparent suffering with the least real suffering, that is, achieving the greatest effect of the punishment on others with the least inflicted pain” (Bozovic, p. 5). The Benefactor employs this same method of discipline. When the One State has a problem with its people, which rarely happen, “they are easily repaired, without having to stop the perpetual great progress of the whole machine. And to expel the offending cog, we have the skillful, severe hand of the Benefactor” (Zamyatin, p. 14). The suffering of the One is used to inflict the fear in others to do the right thing.

The Panopticon, however, does not have to be a physical place. The main aspect of the Panopticon is control, and so it does not have to be simply for prisoners. In Jeremy Bentham’s letters, he describes the many uses for the Panopticon through letters eighteen to twenty-one. These uses include manufactories, mad-houses, hospitals, and schools. According to Foucault, all that is needed to do is place a supervisor in the central tower and shut in each person, be them a madman, patient, or schoolboy (Foucault, p. 200). This then leads to the effect of the Panopticon; “to induce the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, p. 201). In Bentham’s design, the prisoners could not see the supervisor, and the observee would not know if the supervisor was watching them. In fact, no supervisor could be placed in the central tower, and the same effect would still happen. Much like the One State, the Panopticon does not have to be one circular building. Instead, the Panopticon can be a frame of mind. If someone believes that an authority figure is watching them, it will certainly cause people to have caution in how they act. It may not completely dissuade people from committing crimes, passing diseases, or cheating, but will put doubt into the committers mind. In a way, the Panopticon is a conscience.

With One State’s translucent walls, a schedule of events with places to be, and the reading of mail, it appears that the One State is a state of almost constant surveillance. When D-503 goes to see U, a person assigned to monitor mail and pink tickets at the entrance to his living quarters, she informs him of a letter waiting for him. He knew that the letter would have to “read by her, and then pass through the Bureau of Guardians” (Zamyatin, p. 45). He even considered it redundant to explain to the reader why this process exists. With this knowledge, no person would ever send secrets to each other through the mail. It would make no difference if the One State only read every tenth later, or even none of the letters. The impression of this tricks the citizens into order and following Bentham’s original idea behind the Panopticon.

In the One State, each individual believes that he or she is contributing to the greater good of the State. Each person has a role, be those ciphers, teachers, or guardians. The people do not believe in the term “I” or “You”, and even consider the terms to be offensive. They instead only believe in using the word “We” to describe not only each other, but also themselves. When addressed as “you”, D-503 has this feeling: “She used an ancient, long-forgotten pronunciation of “You,” the “You” of the owner to the slave, and it entered me sharply, slowly” (Zamyatin, p. 64). D-503 believes that by being a We, he is cooperating, however, he is merely being obedient. People make this mistake very often; from childhood, parents teach their children to be obedient, to follow instructions and believe lies, and not to question them. The issue with this, according to Claude Steiner is “after many years of obedience training, we become adults and we’re expected to suddenly think for ourselves…Unfortunately, for many of us, that is very difficult, given our childhood training” (Steiner, p. 51). He goes on to say that while we are told as adults to not believe deception, and refuse to be told how to think, we are also told to believe people of authority, such as scientists, politicians, and police.

As the story progresses, D-503 becomes more distant from the One State and I-330 turns him from someone who thinks happiness is control, to someone willing to steal the Intrepid for the rebel cause. If the reader were supposed to view the Benefactor and the One State as control, then the MEPHI would represent the desire for freedom. The issue in this is the MEPHI and I-330 treat D-503 in the same way as the One State. With the way D-503 reacts to the idea of I-330 leaving him, the reader knows that he is enamored with her. When she tests him and says she will leave forever, he responds, “I can’t go on without you, I can’t. I must not be without you” to which she simply responds, “Yes, I know” (Zamyatin, pp. 162-163). The reader never knows how I-330 feels about D-503. While the reader should embrace the rebellion of the MEPHI, both the One State and the MEPHI are formally equal. “The immediate success of the MEPHI rebellion depends on the success I-330 has in dominating D-503; and the suppression of the rebelling appears to depend on the Benefactor’s ability to do the same thing” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 242). Much as I-330 never lets D-503 get too far, the Benefactor never subjects D-503 to the machine, as they both depend on him.

This behavior shows the irony of the title of the novel. Even as D-503 attempts to work with the MEPHI, he is does not possess his own thoughts, “for D-503 can never be an ‘I’. His identity is a function either of the State, or of I-330. He is always ‘We’” (Csicsery-Ronay, p. 242). D-503 can never work with the MEPHI, but instead only work for them. He simply remains obedient to I-330 and the One State. The One State and the MEPHI treat D-503 equally. The MEPHI, or I-330, give D-503 the opportunity to leave, knowing that they had control over him and that he would not. The Benefactor also lets D-503 live instead of viewing him as an offending cog in the machine and killing him. D-503 was not forced down either path, but instead had a choice in whom to help.

The choice presented to D-503 is very black and white. He can either choose freedom, the MEPHI, the overly apparent good in the novel, or he can choose structure and control, the One State, the clear evil. D-503’s understanding of freedom is of an “unorganized, savage state” (Zamyatin, p. 13). This is written in the books, and taught from birth. The alternative is the One State, all-powerful, working in perfect unison to achieve a common goal. When presented with these choices, freedom can sound dangerous, and not worth it. In the end, D-503 chooses control and security, at the expense of the potential to live a life in the way he wants.

The reason he made this choice was that he feared the alternative was a lie. When he met with the Benefactor, the Benefactor asked D-503 if it ever crossed his mind that the MEPHI were using him only because he is the Builder of the Integral, to which he cried, “Don’t! Don’t!” (Zamyatin, p. 188). I-330 defined this action akin to “shielding yourself with you hand and screaming at a bullet” (Zamyatin, p. 188). He believed this to be true, but did not want to believe it, and attempted to scream at the words to make them stop coming. In D-503’s view, the One State never harmed him. He always had a home to live in, a highly respected job to do, and food to eat. He was safe from anyone who might want to harm him, as these actions would be monitored and the offending person executed for deviating from the One State’s mission. When presented with freedom, I-330 emotionally manipulates him, lies to him, and uses him for the access he possesses.

During the meeting, the Benefactor likens himself to being God. The Benefactor knew that people called him an executioner and referenced that “The most merciful Christian, God himself, slowly burning all of the recalcitrants in the fires of Hell-is he not an executioner...And yet, they glorified this God as a God of Love. Absurd? No, the opposite” (Zamyatin, p. 187). The Benefactor shows his views for how the entirety of the One State is ruled. The justification for his actions is then explained as “what have people prayed for, dreamed about, and agonized over? They wanted someone, anyone, to tell them once and for all what happiness is-and then to attach them to this happiness with a chain…What are we now doing, if it isn’t this” (Zamyatin, p. 187). Many people use God as their moral compass, and anyone who chooses to deviate from that could make the person unhappy. Allowing free will allows conflicting ideas, which could make everyone unhappy. With the Benefactor forcing everyone to feel the same and believe the same, all the way from birth, everyone is unanimously happy.

The idea behind controlling people to ensure happiness is not a heavily used topic in dystopic literature. In Tobias Buckell’s short story “Resistance”, we are presented with another such situation as the Panopticon, with the central ruler being an AI named Pan, short for Panopticon. Although the AI Pan is more humble than the Benefactor, there are many points brought up between the both of them. Pan represented the views and will of the people. Originally, people decided they did not want to vote and chose AI to do it for them. Those AI, who represented the people, did the same thing and made one AI to control everything. However, if the AI voted like the people, then the people wanted Pan. Pepper, the mercenary hired for the resistance said “Deep down, somewhere, you all want Pan. You don’t want the responsibility of voting, you want the easy result” to which Stanuel, the story’s protagonist, objected. Pepper continued:

Think of all the times princes and princesses are adored and feted. Think of all the actors and great people we adore and fawn over…we still can’t escape the instincts we carry from being a small band of hunter-gatherers making their way across a plain, depending on a single leader…you all created a technological creature, able to view you all and listen to all your feedback, and embody a benevolent single tribal leader. Not only was it born out of your unconscious needs, even your own emulations overwhelmingly voted it into power as sole ruler of Haven.(Buckell, 2008)

The message Pepper gives for the existence Pan is very similar to the message given by the Benefactor for his own existence. Some of the people of Haven did not understand how a vote could happen, but it was because of the way they would have voted that it did pass. Although the audience is not presented with much information about how the Benefactor came to power, we know the One State was created after a great war. After this war, the people would want a leader to follow, and to guide them. If they did not want the Benefactor, they could have chosen to disregard him. A person cannot initially come to power without the assistance of the people.

Absolute freedom and absolute happiness cannot happen at the same time. In the same way, absolute control and absolute happiness cannot happen either. There will always been a longing for one or the other from different individuals. The message behind We is not the one of these is better than the other. Instead, it is about the struggle in ourselves, and in our society of deciding how much of each you should have in your life.

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